

The Mission Mentoring Programme: an initiative for council employees to become mentors to looked after children

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The Mission Mentoring Programme: an initiative for council employees to become mentors to looked after children

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journals.sagepub.com/home/aaf**Pandelitsa Cosma**

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Abstract

The Mission Mentoring Programme is an innovative scheme that supports council employees to become mentors for looked after children. It was first piloted in 2015, proved successful with rewarding outcomes and has continued to grow and attract interest. This article presents a case study of a young man who participated in the programme and found it helpful for his transition to adulthood and intended employment. It summarises his views and experiences along with those of his mentor and the virtual school headteacher who established the programme. The article begins with a review of the literature on mentoring interventions and sets the background to the programme. Key themes identified highlight the importance of the matching process between mentor and mentee, potential ways of developing the corporate parenting role, destigmatising the care experience and improving children's life chances. The article concludes with a discussion of the programme's potential contribution to welfare services and ways in which it might develop.

Keywords

Looked after children, mentoring, corporate parent, Mission Mentoring Programme

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Introduction

This article begins by reviewing the literature and research on models of mentoring young people and likely impact, before specifically considering their relevance to looked after children. This is followed by an overview of the Mission Mentoring Programme and an exploration of its achievements, as revealed in a case study that analyses the views of mentor, mentee and project commissioner. Their perceptions of the benefits of the programme and the conditions necessary for its success are discussed, together with possible ways of developing local authority mentoring initiatives for looked after children and young people.

Literature review

In order to identify relevant literature on looked after children, mentoring and the role of the corporate parent, peer-reviewed journals were selected using the databases Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts (ASSIA), PsycINFO and International Bibliography of Social Sciences (IBSS), as well as Google Scholar and individual online journals concerned with adoption, fostering and child and family social work. In addition, government documents, mainly from the Department for Education (DfE), were scrutinised. Research on mentoring and mentoring programmes, particularly for looked after children, was located by using search terms such as ‘corporate parenting’, ‘mentoring/mentoring programme’, ‘looked after children’ and ‘children and young people in care’.

The role of the corporate parent

In 1998, the *Quality Protects* programme developed by the Department of Health introduced the concept of the ‘corporate parent’ with the aim of revolutionising services for vulnerable children, including those in public care. The term refers to the collective responsibility of the local authority staff and elected members to provide the best possible care for looked after children (DfE, 2018). As the corporate parent, they have a duty to act in the best interests of the children for whom they are responsible and to provide them with the safety and stability that has often been lacking in their lives. It is recommended that the strengths and skills of each individual are best utilised in order to maximise potential benefits for the young people involved (Bradbury, 2006). As a corporate parent, the local authority has to ensure that all aspects of a child’s life, such as education, health, leisure and aspirations, are considered and managed with the same consideration as for young people not in care (Bradbury, 2006) or, indeed, the practitioners’ own children (Hibbert, 2001).

Applying corporate parenting principles to supporting looked after children

The Children and Social Work Act 2017 introduced seven corporate parenting principles to shape practice and guide the approach. These were intended to maximise secure and nurturing experiences for children and embed a positive culture towards them. In February 2018, the DfE (2018) published statutory guidelines on the application of these principles. These include the promotion of children’s emotional well-being, encouragement for the expression of their views, wishes and feelings and for these to be considered, easy access to useful services and partners, the pursuit of high aspirations, help with securing optimal outcomes, and preparation for adulthood and independent living.

The statutory guidance also provides examples of how leaders and professionals may proactively promote the notion of looked after children being part of a local authority 'family' (DfE, 2018). To achieve this, it mentions the use of volunteer mentors who would enable children and care leavers to build a personal relationship with someone who is independent of the formal system and could provide them with a positive role model. The guidelines state that mentors should seize opportunities to nurture the potential they see in a child by encouraging him or her to pursue activities that interest them, to aim high educationally and occupationally, and to steer them in exploring all possible avenues.

There has been a little research into the role of corporate parenting and its efficacy but in 2006, Bullock and colleagues discussed the question of whether the corporate state can 'parent'. They concluded that for children looked after on a long-term basis, conventional parenting is needed in the same way as for others, but while the daily tasks are largely the same for all children, those who are looked after are likely to demand something extra. Corporate parenting, therefore, may well require additional rather than a different type of care and, if its quality is to improve, long-term responsibility should continue into early adulthood with services matched to children's needs at all times.

Further evidence emerged in 2015 when Catch 22, a UK social enterprise charity which helps vulnerable people build resilience and develop healthy aspirations, offered training to care-experienced adolescents to become peer researchers in a project that gathered the views of looked after children and care leavers on corporate parenting (Dixon, et al., 2015). Participants found that good corporate parenting was demonstrated through being loved, listened to, respected and kept safe – qualities that any child would desire whether or not he or she is in care. They explained that effective corporate parenting requires collaborative working across professionals and the provision of services that are marked by clearly defined roles and responsibilities. The study concluded that for many young people, corporate parents are performing well and a significant number of care leavers succeed in education and enjoy good health. Nonetheless, it was acknowledged that this was not the case for everyone and in the same year, Harris (2015) reviewed the deaths of care leavers in prison custody and raised concerns about the lack of support they had received. He concluded that corporate parenting is 'rarely evident for young adult care leavers who are in custody' (p. 90).

In summary, although the definition of corporate parenting may be relatively clear, opinions on how it should be enacted vary. Furthermore, the extent to which corporate parenting principles are implemented has received little attention. The role of mentoring is mentioned in the DfE guidelines but only briefly, with no explanation of how it could be used to produce positive outcomes for the children involved. This study seeks to shed light on ways of developing such programmes by providing an example of the successful mentoring of an older teenager in care.

Mentoring children and young people

The mentoring of young people has been defined in several ways. Rhodes and colleagues (2002: 3) describe it as:

... a relationship between an older, more experienced adult and a younger protégé – a relationship in which the adult provides ongoing guidance, instruction, and encouragement aimed at developing the competence and character of the protégé.

Darling, Hamilton and Niego (1994: 228) are more specific, adding that it is 'most effective when focusing on teaching a particular skill'.

The literature on effective mentoring practice has emphasised the importance of collaborative partnerships. However, traditional mentoring models have been critiqued in relation to their intrinsic power differentials that lead to underlying institutional goals distorting practice (Colley, 2001). Encouragement has therefore been given to less hierarchical approaches backed by collaborative relationships, known as 'co-mentoring', where each person is equal and communication is reciprocal (Clarke, 2004).

Mentoring has been implemented worldwide across various contexts and has been universally acknowledged as benefiting both mentors and mentees (Kochan and Pascarelli, 2003). Quantitative research suggests that a positive association between non-parental adult mentors and mentees leads to improved well-being in the young person involved and several meta-analyses have demonstrated positive effects with regard to children's academic achievements, psychosocial development and social behaviour (DuBois, et al., 2011; Tolan, et al., 2013).

But as there is no agreed definition of mentoring, Ehrich, Hansford and Tennent (2001) have argued that the resulting ambiguity makes it difficult to pinpoint the characteristics and outcomes of effective practice. Moreover, the available research tends to be descriptive, lacking sophisticated analysis, and open to bias, perhaps in order to present mentoring favourably (Piper and Piper, 2000). It is also inconsistent in terms of the alleged benefits described (Benishek, et al., 2004; DuBois, et al., 2002). Hall (2003) completed a literature review into mentoring for young people and concluded that most large-scale quantitative research exploring its impact have been undertaken in the USA, with many results not reaching levels of statistical significance. Thus, it has to be acknowledged that the evidence regarding the effectiveness of mentoring in the UK is weak and the mechanisms associated with success remain unclear (Renick Thomson and Zand, 2010). Despite these small effect sizes for mentoring generally, the bulk of literature does concur on one important point: that the key factor determining success is the quality of the relationship between mentor and mentee (Dallos and Comley-Ross, 2005; Klasen and Clutterbuck, 2012).

Mentoring looked after children

Establishing positive relationships with supportive adults who are not parents or carers has been identified as a protective factor for youth in the general population (Zimmerman, 2013) as well as for those who are more marginalised (Lucey and Walkerdine, 2000). A consistent finding in resilience research exploring protective factors for young people at risk of poor outcomes is the presence of a supportive non-parental adult who themselves has experienced both adversity and success (Masten and Garmezy 1985). Such findings have triggered growing research into the role of 'natural mentors' in promoting resilience and helping with transitions (Osterling and Hines, 2006).

Gilligan (1999) compared the mentoring role to that of other adults in the life of looked after children. Although mentoring cannot be the substitute for an absent stable relationship with a caregiver, it can act as a supplement. Indeed, it may be used in a way that encourages

and nurtures the talents or interests of a young person, increases their levels of self-esteem and facilitates relationships outside the care system. Moreover, it helps when the youngster involved is aware that the mentor is offering support voluntarily rather than being paid to meet a statutory obligation to do so.

The role of an independent visitor was introduced by the Children Act 1989 for looked after children who had infrequent contact with their family. He or she provides the child with the opportunity for regular contact with an adult outside of the care system with whom they can maintain a safe and stable relationship and share problems and activities (Showell, 2009). However, questions have been raised about this role as research suggests that natural mentoring by a sympathetic non-parental adult who is part of a young person's social network may be more effective than the support provided by a formally appointed mentor who is unfamiliar to the young person (Britner, Randall and Ahrens, 2013; Thompson, Greeson and Brunsink, 2016).

For looked after children, attachment theory has been used to explore the dynamics of mentoring relationships and to explain how they can provide positive support that compensates for past harm (Evans and Ave, 2000). In a review of published studies, DuBois and Karcher (2005) concluded that children identified as 'at risk' of negative outcomes benefited from mentoring more than others, particularly with regard to their perception of relationships with other people (Renick Thomson and Zand, 2010).

Adley and Jupp Kina (2017) adopted a narrower focus and explored the perceptions of care leavers on their transitions to adulthood. They reported that the young people tended to have a very small support network but rated continued emotional support as highly important. It is unfortunate therefore that the *Munro Review of Child Protection* (Munro, 2011) found that high caseloads mean that social workers are unable to spend much time building relationships with young people and their families, and that their statutory duties often take priority over giving emotional support (Rogers, 2011). Furthermore, the person undertaking the social worker role often changes several times over the course of a young person's care career, compounding the child's history of disrupted relationships (Elsley, 2013).

A more recent systematic review of services for looked after children by Thompson, Greeson and Brunsink (2016) reiterates these earlier findings by highlighting the role of mentors in providing encouragement, assistance, emotional support and information, and by showing the protective effect of developing strong bonds with competent and supportive adults (Rhodes, 2005). However, despite the availability of these findings, there is still insufficient exploration of which aspects of mentoring produce which effects.

The effectiveness of mentoring schemes for children in care in the UK

Since not all looked after children have access to 'natural mentors', the introduction of more structured mentoring programmes with volunteers was proposed as a way of replicating the reported benefits of forming a positive relationship with a non-parental adult (Rhodes, 1994) and several programmes have been implemented across the UK, particularly in Scotland. Unfortunately, while several evaluations of these initiatives are available, there have been very few controlled research studies of either mentoring generally or of services for looked after children, so the findings remain tentative.

One of the most successful and longest running mentoring programmes in the UK is the Prince's Trust Progression Mentor programme, introduced in 2011. Clayden and Stein

(2005) conducted a descriptive evaluation of the Prince's Trust mentoring projects. They reported that young people in care found mentoring valuable for building confidence, promoting aspirations and improving well-being, but it was difficult to measure long-term benefits due to the complexity and multifaceted nature of the factors impacting upon a young person in care.

The implementation of region-wide mentoring programmes has also yielded some successful results in the UK. Lewis and colleagues (2015) evaluated the Success4Life programme, a project catering for secondary age pupils in care, delivered by the University of Manchester. The project focused on developing both life and career-based skills for the future by working alongside positive role models. Pupils involved in the scheme reported increased motivation and desire to remain in education and apply to university after leaving school.

More recently, between November 2018 and January 2019, the Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection (CELCIS) carried out the first Scotland-wide survey of young people who had experienced the care system and who were now attending college and university (O'Neill, et al., 2019). The participants stressed that the key enabling factor is the importance of having a reliable and consistent relationship with a member of staff.

Traditionally, 'natural' mentoring programmes for looked after children have been community based and focus on a range of activities aiming to foster personal development outside of the school environment (Herrera, Sipe and McClanahan, 2000; Sipe and Roder, 1999). However, subsequent research suggested that interventions aimed at looked after children also need to focus on educational achievement (Berridge, 2007); as a result, school-based approaches have become increasingly popular. The success of such programmes has been documented; for example, the MCR Pathways Mentoring Programme for children in care, which began in 2013 in Scotland and reported an increase in the percentage of mentees who went on to college, university or employment from 54% in 2013–2014 to 86% in 2016–2017 (Glasgow City Council, 2018). But equally, community-based mentorships came to be seen as providing opportunities for young people whose interests schools cannot easily facilitate, such as those rooted in young people's outside activities or for children at risk of under-achievement or exclusion (Thompson, Greeson and Brunsink, 2016).

In sum, when reviewing the literature on the mentoring of looked after children, there do seem to be clear benefits but much remains to be explored (Colley, 2001). The conditions for establishing and managing a successful project are also indicated although, again, more details are needed. This article seeks to help fill this gap by describing a successful case study within the Mission Mentoring Programme.

The Mission Mentoring Programme

The Mission Mentoring Programme seeks to apply the principles outlined by the DfE (2018), which emphasise the importance and responsibility of the local authority and those within it to support looked after children with their aspirations and transition to adulthood. It was set up in 2015 by the local authority's virtual school team, which supports the health, care and educational needs of the children and is managed by the virtual school head (VSH). Local authority employees volunteer to become mentors and complete a personal profile giving details of their occupation and interests, as do the mentees. The aim is to

match mentors and mentees with similar interests in the hope that this may encourage discussions about future aspirations and lead to effective collaboration.

Case study

The following case study explores the Mission Mentoring Programme from the perspectives of three individuals involved in a successful mentoring relationship: the mentee, mentor and programme commissioner. It examines the strengths and weaknesses of the intervention as well as how it might be further developed.

Research design

A case study research design was adopted, as this is a qualitative method that facilitates meaningful understanding of complex social phenomena (Yin, 2003). It became a single exploratory, theory-building case study (Thomas, 2015) as only one participant responded to the request to be interviewed. While a single case study has limitations, in that it cannot be generalised, it offers an important insight into a case where mentoring was considered supportive, and therefore gives a nuanced, deeper and holistic account of mentoring for a child in care, identifying the benefits and how it could be developed from multiple perspectives. The main limitation to using a single case study for this research was the inability to produce, analyse and compare data within and across different situations (Yin, 2003). While this meant that similarities and differences across the experiences of various mentors and mentees could not be explored, it allows a richer description and analysis of a successful example.

Methods and procedure

Mentees were contacted via telephone or email to explain the purpose of the research and their participation; those who were interested were sent an information sheet describing the study's purpose, procedure and potential outcomes and giving them an opportunity to raise questions. Semi-structured interviews with the mentee, mentor and VSH were the chosen method of data collection. Steps were taken to ensure validity, rigour and robustness of findings, such as interview questions being checked by the virtual school team and interviews being recorded and checked back with the participants.

Participants

Sampling was based on a purposive sample, as participants were recruited specifically because they had experienced the mentoring programme, or they had commissioned it. Participants were therefore deliberately chosen as 'informants' due to their knowledge of what was being researched (Tongco, 2007). Seven mentees were contacted, and one responded showing interest in the research and was keen to share his experiences. Another young person showed interest in taking part but her personal circumstances meant that she was not able to do so at the time. Direct contact with potential participants was not possible and was mediated through their personal advisers, which provided a barrier to recruitment. In addition, it is important to note that some participants may not have had a positive mentoring experience and did not wish to express this. Moreover, for some, a long time had passed since they had left the local authority, so they may have been less interested

in taking part. Since only one mentee volunteered, a richer account of his mentoring experience was explored by interviewing his mentor and the head of the virtual school who led the project. Interviews with the three individuals ranged from 25 minutes to one hour. Ethical considerations were observed throughout the research (British Psychological Society, 2018), including gaining informed consent, the right to withdraw, and confidentiality of data.

The mentee

Rhys (pseudonym) is aged 16 years 8 months and currently attends an independent sixth-form college in England where he is a boarder. It provides A Level education for candidates interested in joining the British armed forces. He is a looked after child and resides with long-term foster carers.

The mentor

Rhys signed up to the Mission Mentoring Programme and was matched with Matt (pseudonym). Matt joined the local authority as a senior staff member having previously held a senior role in the British Army. Rhys met with his mentor at the start of Year 11 when aged 16 and was matched with Matt as he was interested in joining the army. With his knowledge and experience, Matt supported Rhys's application to the military college he currently attends.

The commissioner of the Mission Mentoring Programme

All local authorities in England are required to have a VSH who monitors looked after children as if they were in one school. The DfE (2018) guidelines state that the VSH is the individual responsible for ensuring that the local authority promotes the educational achievement of the young people it cares for and has a critical role in helping to promote high ambitions and positive outcomes for them as part of its corporate parenting role. In this case, the VSH, Michelle (pseudonym), was the person responsible for setting up the Mission Mentoring Programme in September 2015.

Data analysis

Interviews were first transcribed verbatim and then analysed using thematic analysis – a qualitative method for 'identifying and reporting patterns (themes) within the data' (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 79). It offers a flexible approach while still being able to produce a rich and meaningful account of the evidence, and was used in this study to code and select patterns based on frequency as well as themes of interest within each strand of the case.

Results and discussion

Findings are presented as themes pertaining to two research questions. The participant from whom the data was generated is identified; namely the mentor (Matt), mentee (Rhys) or the VSH (Michelle). The themes are elaborated with quotations from the interviews alongside links to relevant literature.

Research question 1: What did the mentee, mentor and the VSH see as benefits of the Mission Mentoring Programme?

Theme: Power-balanced partnership (generated by views shared by mentee and VSH). Rhys highlighted how having a rapport and connection with his mentor was very important:

I think it's gone really well. We had a good connection; feeling comfortable with being with this person and speaking... the atmosphere was really good so we could talk freely without feeling nervous.

It seemed that he appreciated being in an equal partnership marked by mutual respect, listening and communication. He explained:

We listened to each other quite well... if I had something to say he would listen and go off that rather than just having a straight mindset. It was more 50/50, no one really led the session. We both went with how it was flowing.

This is consistent with the modernised model of co-mentoring discussed by Clarke (2004) as compared to traditional mentoring, which is dogged by power imbalances (Colley, 2001). Alongside Matt's practical experience and insight, supporting Rhys to be aspirational and grow in self-belief was a key part of their successful relationship. This is consistent with Gilligan's (1999) portrayal of the mentor role as nurturing a young person's interests. It also reflects the views shared by Michelle that the impact of the programme shifted to include developing confidence and interests in addition to supporting aspirations.

Theme: Specialist knowledge of the mentor (generated by views of mentee). Rhys repeatedly mentioned how beneficial it was that his mentor had previous experience in the army as it provided career advice and assisted with planning and decision-making for his own choice of career:

... It was like the ideal partnership... so [Matt] has been through the whole system; he knows everything about it that you can know so there was a lot I can take from his experiences.

This confirms the finding of Herrera and colleagues (2000) that mentors and mentees who share similar interests have the strongest relationships, and alerts practitioners to Ahrens and colleagues' (2011) warning that differences and conflicts over these matters can be a major cause of relationships ending.

However, exact matching of mentors to mentees may not always be feasible, so it may be that the recruitment phase of a project needs a greater focus on this, mirroring the MCR Pathways programme where mentors are recruited for their specific skills and experiences. But again the evidence is equivocal with other research suggesting that 'natural mentoring' (mentoring from a non-parental adult part of a young person's social network) is more beneficial than that provided by a mentor who is selected for a particular reason and is previously unknown to the young person (Britner, Randall and Aherens, 2013).

Theme: De-stigmatising and understanding of children in care (generated by views of mentor and VSH). Matt shared that a clear benefit of the programme was that it helped open his mind and

increase his knowledge about looked after children which, in his view, is powerful when fighting stereotypes and reducing the stigma still faced by many young people in care. In his own words:

When you meet them, you start to understand the resilience of the human spirit... Everyone talks about the negative cascade down in terms of care going through the generations but here is a positive cascade... It shows that people will bounce back given the right support and conditions.

This mirrors the views of Michelle who saw the scheme as powerful in changing the narratives of children:

People in the organisation came to have such a better understanding of what it was to be a child in care or a care leaver instead of it being merely a statistic or performance chart on paper... You start to see them or think about them differently...

This seems a positive result considering the stigma that is still attached to being in care, as demonstrated in the comments of care leavers reported in the study by Rogers (2017).

Theme: Personal impact upon mentor and mentee (generated by views of mentor and VSH). A view expressed by Matt, the mentor, concerned the positive impact and rewarding experience the scheme provided him with personally:

Whatever bad day I was having, if I remembered Rhys and why we are doing what we are doing, it really helped me personally.

This was echoed by Michelle who emphasised that the biggest strength was the mentors' passion:

Mentors have said the programme taps into what drives them as a person and why they do their job, as sometimes you lose the direct contact with the young people.

Matt also recognised the impact of the mentoring on Rhys's confidence:

The first time I saw him he seemed like this quiet and withdrawn lad and later, he showed up his shoulders were back and he seemed so much more confident.

He explained that the positive relationship they formed continued and he has remained in contact with Rhys, which was appreciated by both. This seems important in view of Thompson and colleagues' (2016) finding that many studies have shown that long-standing mentoring relationships are not only valued by young people but are also more effective in influencing outcomes.

Theme: The corporate parenting role (generated by views of VSH). Michelle summarised her perception of what being a corporate parent involves. She felt that the scheme had helped mentors 'have a much better understanding of being a corporate parent and what it

means'. She also spoke about recognising the corporate parenting role as being similar to any other type of parenting:

We must strive to achieve that what we think is good enough for our own children, we do the same for those in care and the scheme has helped put across that message across the authority.

Part of that parenting role, she stated, is about care:

We've found that we don't talk much about care do we? And that emotional link, it's not just about aspirations but about the love and nurture these young people need.

Research by Adley and Jupp Kina (2017) emphasises the significance of emotional support in the views of care leavers, mirroring Michelle's comment that providing nurture and love for looked after children is as important as educational and career advice. Michelle explained that the adults involved in the lives of those in care are paid whereas mentor volunteers choose to be involved, demonstrating to the young person care and interest, which she believes to be very powerful. Her views are consistent with those of Gilligan (1999) who considered the positive impact that a voluntary mentor role can have on a young person in care, beyond the statutory duty of a professional. Nevertheless, he also states that regardless of whether a mentor is 'naturally occurring' or specifically recruited as a volunteer, the importance of a genuine interest in the young person and a trusting relationship remains the same.

Research question 2: What would the mentee, mentor and the VSH recommend as areas of development and important factors to consider for the future of the Mission Mentoring Programme?

Theme: Open-mindedness (generated by views of mentee). Rhys highlighted the importance of the mentee accepting the support offered by the mentor and being open to new learning:

The mentor has had a lot of experience and if they've been matched with someone their experiences will be similar, so even if you don't agree with it sometimes, take their views on board because it may help... Just take it in, chances are they will know something you won't.

This appears to add to the existing literature on the qualities valued in mentoring relationships. For example, Thompson, Greeson and Brunsink (2016) note that young people value encouragement, emotional and informational support, but Rhys's views suggest that for this to be provided, the mentee must remain open-minded to learning and accepting advice.

Theme: Mentee-focused (generated by views of mentor and mentee). Both Rhys and Matt believed in the importance of ensuring that mentors respond to the views of their mentee rather than imposing ideas drawn from their own experiences. To quote Rhys:

...so they need to be able to understand that their views may not always fit with the mentees' views... they should go with what they [the mentee] wants rather than what they think is best.

This point echoes the practice recommendation of McLeod (2007) that listening to young people requires a willingness to consider alternative options and a discussion agenda that contains mutually respected views.

Theme: Expansion of the programme and wider impact (generated by views of mentor and VSH). Matt shared detailed views of his wishes for the future of the Mission Mentoring scheme. He stated a desire to make the scheme bigger so that it can have an impact at a societal as well as at an individual level:

We are beginning to talk about this local authority being the family firm for children in care; if you're in the family then you would get a job. So I would like it expanded out to business leaders so that when he or she makes decisions about employment, they might not close their minds up, so essentially there are two sides . . . benefits for children themselves and for wider society. I think we can achieve something like that.

This closely follows the corporate parenting guidelines and principles outlined by the DfE (2018) which are underpinned by the concept of looked after children being part of a local authority 'family', a notion also reinforced in Michelle's perception of a corporate parent where professionals treat looked after children as if they were their own by investing the same level of care and support. She also concurred with Rhys and Matt in her desire to expand the scheme: 'so the next thing we want to do is ideally to extend it to other partner organisations but that is a whole other ball game'. Rogers (2017) has shown that young people in foster care are still experiencing stigma in their daily social interactions and expanding initiatives like the Mission Mentoring Programme across organisations within the community may help ameliorate a worrying situation.

Theme: Matching and support (generated by views of VSH). Michelle's ideas for future development of the Mission Mentoring scheme also included proactive matching of mentor and mentee and a greater level of participation for the mentee in the matching process. Currently, the virtual school team examines the profiles from mentors and mentees and makes the matches themselves, but Michelle stated:

I'd like young people to come along where we present profiles of the mentors to them, so they have more of a choice about who they might want to work with the most.

She also noted a greater need of support for mentors which is more structured and part of formal protocol, explaining, 'I'd like to think about the networks of support for the mentors where they can share ideas and have conversations between themselves.' Although there is evidence that mentoring is less beneficial when a mentor is formally matched based on skills and is unfamiliar to a young person (e.g. Britner, Randall and Ahrens, 2013), the research by Herrera and colleagues (2000) and others cited in this article suggests the importance of the mentee and mentor having shared interests, whatever the method used to make the match.

Conclusions, limitations and future directions for research

This case study indicates the experiences, views and outcomes of the Mission Mentoring Programme as expressed by a mentee, his mentor and the project commissioner. Although

the value of this exercise is inevitably limited, quality assurance measures were taken to ensure that the information was as objective as possible. When set alongside other small-scale studies, such as that by Kirk and Day (2011), understanding of the phenomena of mentoring and knowledge about the conditions auspicious for its success begin to emerge (Thomas, 2015). More research – qualitative and quantitative and based on samples of all looked after children – is needed before anything can be conclusive. However, the experiences and status of looked after children in the UK are not improving and small-scale local initiatives, as with new methods and applications of fostering and adoption, often stimulate reforms to policy and practice nationally.

The messages for those interested in setting up mentoring schemes provided by the mentee demonstrate a strong appreciation for the practical knowledge and expertise provided by the mentor and highlight the importance of this guidance to help young people achieve their educational and career goals. Recommendations for development include greater support for mentors, more focus on appropriate matching of mentor and mentee and expansion of the scheme to new areas. Views provided by both the mentor and the VSH indicate that motivations for the scheme need to be underpinned by a mission to improve outcomes for looked after children on a much wider scale, by targeting the perceptions and practices of those beyond the child's immediate support network, i.e. to those embedded within local authorities, communities and society as a whole.

The study also reignites attention to the role of the corporate parent and the responsibility of the state to provide high quality care for looked after children. Several illustrations have been provided where mentoring can help in difficult situations like placement disruption, school problems and return home. One perennial problem affecting Rhys was that created by the withdrawal of support once older adolescents leave the care system. Although recent legislation has covered this, it remains a challenging transition and is currently exacerbated by wider social and economic difficulties. The role of a volunteer mentor who can maintain some form of contact over time could help ensure some continuity in the advice, resources and emotional support that these young people need.

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